

2.4.2008 - Rahall: President's Ballooning Budget Falls Hard on West Virginians

U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV), citing harmful cuts to programs essential to many seniors, families, and hard-working West Virginians, slammed the President's proposed budget for FY 2009, released by the White House today.

"The President's budget spending has ballooned to epic proportions, yet manages to cut essential programs and fails to meet the most basic needs of our citizens. In an era of dangerous deficits, debt, and down-turning economies, the President has opted to decrease critical investments in our Nation's future in an attempt to balance the budget on the backs of our country's most vulnerable citizens."

President Bush's \$3.1 trillion budget seeks historically high levels of funding, but slashes programs such as MSHA, Medicare and Medicaid, Essential Air Service, the Appalachian Regional Commission, Amtrak, and a host of other domestic programs essential to the health and well-being of Americans.

The President requested \$332 million for the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), which includes a cut of \$9 million for coal enforcement.

"I just cannot see how in the blazes this Administration can continue to be so dunderheaded when it comes to how its budget cuts affect the lives of the American people," Rahall said.

"For years, MSHA's budget was slashed and the numbers of inspectors dropped. As a result, conditions in the mines grew worse and the toll of miners who died on the job climbed. The President should be ashamed to send a budget to Capitol Hill that cuts funding for mine safety enforcement when so many mines in my district went without full quarterly inspections last year and the fines for hundreds of violators have fallen through the cracks."

The enforcement portion of the MSHA budget funds, among other things, inspectors and their travel costs, technicians who review safety plans, and support personnel who administer the inner-workings of the program.

President Bush's proposed budget will cut Medicare, which provides healthcare for more than 360,000 elderly and disabled West Virginians, by \$6 billion in the next year and by \$91 billion from 2009 to 2013. Medicaid, which provides health insurance for over 390,000 low-income West Virginians, would be cut by \$1.2 billion in the next year and by nearly \$14 billion over the next five years.

"It is extremely unwise for the President to make serious budget cuts at a time when our country is experiencing an economic downturn and families are already struggling with the exorbitant costs of heat, food, gas and, particularly, healthcare," said Rahall. "In this weak economy, more and more Americans are having difficulty finding affordable healthcare, making programs like Medicare and Medicaid more critical than ever."

In addition, Bush's FY 2009 budget proposes to cut, below last year's levels, \$15 million from the Essential Air Service (EAS) and Rural Airport Improvement Fund, \$11 million from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), and \$525 million from Amtrak. Rahall predicted that the President will find little support from the Congress or the American people for his a budget that makes such egregious cuts.

"The Administration's budget cuts programs that keep our families healthy, our workers safe, our communities connected, and our economies going strong," said Rahall. "These callous and nonsensical cuts will fall hard on many West Virginia families, already struggling just to make ends meet."

Rahall also criticized the President's repeated threats to veto items in future spending bills and his executive order telling Federal agencies to ignore funds that Members of Congress send home for local initiatives.

"Members of Congress-not the President, nor his budget bureaucrats-know the needs of their districts better than anyone else. The people back home cannot pick up the phone and call the White House when a bridge needs repair or a water system fails; they call us," said Rahall. "Given the historic size of his budget-much of which is going overseas-it is disingenuous for the President to attack funding installments to help the people and communities within our own borders."